



BLSA AT 50: HONORING THE PAST, CELEBRATING THE FUTURE

By Laura Lee

Even though it was 50 years ago, University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law Professor Larry S. Gibson remembers 1968 like it was yesterday.

"There had been racial tensions that turned into riots. There was activism around bringing the Vietnam War to an end. There was controversy within the Democratic Party and the tumultuous Democratic National Convention in Chicago," he recalls, ticking off a list of events that defined the year.

It was a turbulent year that highlighted the growing racial schism in the United States. In February the Kerner Commission issued its famous report declaring the United States was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." And then on April 4, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, sparking riots across the country, and in Baltimore on April 6, resulting in six deaths and widespread damage across the city.

"A lot went on in the turmoil of 1968 and folks found different ways to respond," says Gibson, who also serves as faculty adviser for the Black Law Students Association (BLSA) at Maryland Carey Law. "One of the ways was the spawning of political groups and legal groups."

BLSA's Beginnings

At what was then known as the University of Maryland Law School, four students: David Allen '69, The Honorable William H. "Billy" Murphy, Jr. '69, Norris Ramsey '70, and Turhan Robinson turned their frustration into activism



PHOTO: Staff gather at the offices of Joseph Howard's campaign for Judge Maryland Carey Law, Vol. 2018 (2018), Art 7 in Baltimore, Md. in 1968. The founders of Maryland Carey Law's BLSA Chapter and the organization's future adviser, Professor Larry S. Gibson, worked for the campaign.

by becoming the founding members of the Maryland Law chapter of the Black American Law Students Association (BALSA).

BALSA, which became the National Black Law Students Association (NBLSA), came into being at the New York University School of Law in 1968. It was the brain child of Algernon "A.J." Cooper, who told *NYU Law Magazine* he created it to "be a bridge over troubled waters."

Allen recalls the four meeting for lunch on a late summer day in 1968 on Murphy's back porch to hash out the mission for the Maryland Law chapter. "Our main goals," Murphy says, "were to integrate the law school and support the black students so they would do well." They were determined to bring more black students to the law school and keep them there. "We knew we were going to make a change," Murphy says. "I was and am eternally optimistic."

The specter of Jim Crow hovered over the entire country, and Maryland Law was no exception. From daily student interaction to the

administrative level, life as a black law student held its share of indignities.

Allen matter-of-factly recounts a personal story of an incident illustrating the need for a forum to voice African-American students' concerns.

When Allen was a first-year law student preparing for moot court, his adviser asked classmates to pair off into teams. Everyone paired off, and in fact, there were some groups of three, Allen recalls. "I was by myself. I was the only black student," he says. Allen didn't make an issue of his isolation. "I didn't see much point in raising hell, there was nobody to listen to me," and went through moot court by himself. When the judge asked him why he was alone, he simply said, "I was the odd man out."

It was those feelings of marginalization, being the "odd man out," that pushed the young law students to organize for themselves and for the students of color who would come after them. In 1968 there were four black students and no black faculty members. Those first pioneering students wanted that to change.

Strength in Numbers

The wheels of progress moved slowly, however, and despite gains, retention of black students remained an issue. Ed Smith Jr. '75, was president of BLSA from 1973-1974. He says out of 20 students who entered with him in 1972, only eight were left by 1973. "We decided we were going to take some action," recalls Smith. And by action, he meant civil disobedience. The mission was for BLSA members to chain the doors of the library and if necessary glue the pages of the American Law Reports series, crippling students' ability to research case law. The goal was to get their classmates readmitted to law school.

The night before the protest, Smith found out someone had alerted the authorities, and the Maryland State Police would be in position to make arrests in the morning. A steady rain the next day put a damper on the turnout—there were just three people including Smith—but the police had turned out in force.

"It was raining and we're standing there waiting for everybody else to show up, and we see the police standing on a bridge watching us. And they were just laughing because they had set up for this great big arrest," Smith recalls with a wry chuckle.



Alumni pose for a group photo at the Black Alumni 3rd Reunion & Symposium in September 2013.

That's when the school's only black professor, James Chandler, showed up and said, "Eddie, it's over." Smith ended up back in Chandler's office, where he expected to be reprimanded and kicked out of school. To his surprise, he was told to come to class the next day. The "protest" had its desired effect, however, because 8 of the 12 students were allowed to return to the law school to repeat a year. "We accomplished something and those people matriculated and graduated," says Smith.

Prestigious Graduates and Increasing Diversity

Fast forward nearly 50 years to the present day and things have changed for the better. Although the law school continues to press for a more diverse class, Maryland Carey Law is the top school for African-American enrollment among the top 50 law schools ranked by *U.S. News & World Report*. The change is part of a concerted effort that includes the 2017 launch of the Diversity and Inclusion Scholars Initiative, aimed at increasing minority representation in the legal field, and in 2016, the creation of a new position, Associate Dean for Diversity and Inclusion. Professor Russell McClain '95 is the first to serve in the new position.

Maryland Carey Law is not only a leader in diversity within the student body, but its graduates continue to be prominent leaders, including Rep. Elijah Cummings '76, former

Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake '95, Prince George's County State's Attorney Angela Alsobrooks '96, and Baltimore City Solicitor Andre Davis '78, who served as BLSA chapter president. Davis, who celebrated his 40th anniversary of graduating from law school this year, says looking back is valuable, but so is looking to the future. "It's very important we support those coming along behind to continue to build up the presence of lawyers of color in the profession," he says.

Law Students-Plus

While BLSA continues to play a role promoting social justice, it also serves to foster a sense of community in an atmosphere that can be socially isolating for all students, not just minorities. McClain '95 notes BLSA membership gave him an immediate sense of belonging. "I went to school in the '90s and Maryland was actually among the more diverse schools back then," he says. "But my BLSA membership created an instant opportunity for me to have colleagues with similar experiences who could support each other and really feel like we belonged in the building."

Murphy says that while membership encourages academic excellence and a sense of community, it can also play a role in future job prospects. "One of my criteria for young black lawyers that I'm going to hire is, 'Were you a member

of BLSA?” he says, explaining, “I’m trying to cultivate a commonality of purpose and action.” His firm, Murphy, Falcon & Murphy, which has a reputation for aggressive legal advocacy and a commitment to fighting for justice, represented the family of Freddie Gray following his death in police custody.

Active members of the Maryland Carey Law BLSA chapter enjoy networking opportunities, support and enrichment activities, and numerous social events designed to highlight diversity. Members also give back through community service projects, such as their neighborhood cleanup on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day this past January.

Incoming President Alexis Gbedmudu, 2L, says she wants to utilize her presidency to advocate for even more community work, including working with young people. As a soon-to-be lawyer, “I understand my privilege,” she says. “I hope to utilize our privilege to mentor students who may seek to walk in our shoes but maybe can’t see themselves in our shoes.”

Smith agrees and hopes that black law students recognize that a license to practice law presents a unique responsibility. “They have a special tool in their hands and have to understand they are law students-plus,” he says. “Every time they read the newspaper about some injustice they should understand who they are as potential leaders in their communities.”

If President-elect Gbedmudu is any indication, the future of the Maryland Carey Law chapter of BLSA is in good hands. “BLSA gives us a forum that makes us better advocates, better thinkers and better speakers,” she says. “It allows us to channel that spirit that was alive and well in 1968 and has really helped a lot of people to be the great advocates they are today.” ■

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— Alexis Gbedmudu, 2L

Professor Larry S. Gibson (right) gives a tour of the Thurgood Marshall exhibit at the Black Alumni 2nd Reunion & Symposium in September 2008.

